



Old Times... and older times

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Old Times... and older times

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Most interpretations of *Old Times* have considered the power struggle that takes place within the drama's triangle, pointing out the competition between Deeley and Anna over Deeley's wife Kate, with whom Anna lived as a roommate some 20 years before the play takes place. Robert Conklin, for example, places *Old Times* with *Betrayal* as a memory play in which "power goes to the character whose version of reality is accepted, verified or objectified. In both plays that power goes to the character desired as object, Emma in *Betrayal*, and Kate in *Old Times*" (20). In the play's final pantomime which shows Kate in the ascendancy and Deeley and Anna in defeat, critics tend to agree that Deeley is defeated but some, Arthur Ganz, for example, see a latent energy in Anna that might be rekindled (176). What critics do agree about is the use of memory as a weapon, so that the past is evoked to destroy what is stable in the present. In the play "the present is merely the arena where divergent visions of the past meet in mortal combat" (Dohmen, 194).

To interpret *Old Times* in the light of older, mythic times is to focus less on the power struggle in the drama as leading to victory or defeat and more on how the conflict involves broader forces of life and death, of renewal within cycle. Throughout time the triangle has been a dual symbol of life and death, its meanings stretching from the distant past into the present. While the upward pointing triangle represents the patriarchy, with the male at the top, the downward pointing triangle suggests the womb, that place where birth and sexuality coincide. The twin of life, however, is death, in the sense that the earth repossesses the grain in the annual cycle of the seasons so that the seed can once again gestate and rebirth can occur. In *Old Times*, the love triangle involves the time-honored struggle to form an integrated self in this endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Ancient mythology personifies this cycle in the story of the rape of Persephone in which the triangular relationship between maiden, mother Earth, and patriarchal god portrays the unity of life and death; the myth dramatizes a symbiotic relationship in the sense that without decay there can be no renewal. *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* relates the tale of how Persephone is stolen from her mother Demeter and taken to the Underworld by its Dark Lord Hades. Demeter, goddess of the grain and fertility, wanders the earth wearing symbolic black in mourning for her lost daughter. Stricken with grief and vengefulness, Demeter swears to never allow the earth to bear fruit until her daughter is delivered safely to her. Upon hearing this, Hades' brother Zeus, ruler of Olympus, persuades his brother to allow the maiden to return. Hades, however, tricks Persephone into returning to the Underworld by giving her pomegranate seeds which obligate her to preside as his Queen for one third of the year. This portion of the year corresponds to winter in which the earth becomes barren as the mother once again mourns the loss of her daughter, winter giving way to spring with her joy at her daughter's return. The crone figure, Hekate, participates in the myth as another aspect of Demeter who acts as a catalyst of change. By exploring the triangle in the myth of Demeter and Persephone, going back so to speak to "older times," one may find arresting parallels with Pinter's *Old Times* that shed light on his own treatment of the "eternal triangle" in that drama. Throughout Harold Pinter's play, numerous examples in setting, dialogue, and language reflect the continuous power struggle exemplified by the upward pointing triangle. The heart of the conflict centers around the battle for the consummate possession of the main character, Kate, who embodies Persephone as the introverted "shy fawn" (Pinter, 60), one who remains virginal in the original sense of the word: belonging only to the self (Starhawk, 46). Kate lives in a world of dreams protected by a shield of silence and self-possession. For example, Anna, who is visiting Kate and her husband Deeley, observes of Kate: "Sometimes, walking, in the

park, I'd say to her, 'You're dreaming, wake up, what are you dreaming?' and she'd look round at me, flicking her hair, and look at me as if I were part of her dream" (21). Kate's husband Deeley comments that her head "floats" away, quite unattached to her body (20); her waterlike, emotional qualities, which Deeley is unable to categorize or control, seem to elude his objective mentality.

Deeley appears at a disadvantage since the action in the play occurs in the domain of his wife — the home. The fact that Deeley's "work takes him away quite often" while Kate stays in her home located by the sea in the country shows that clearly they are on Kate's turf, far from the city life dominated by men.

The "timeless" workings of nature and the cycle of the seasons occur in the myth of Demeter and Persephone in yet another triangle of maiden, mother, and crone, which represents a universal journey of consciousness in the female psyche. The correlation of Harold Pinter's play to this phenomenon occurs within the relationship of the two main female characters, Kate and Anna, who are "old time" friends reunited after a twentyyear separation. Here, Pinter dramatizes the mythic cycle of loss and reunion as Anna, rather than arriving for her visit, materializes like a dream, giving the suggestion that she has never departed. This play opens with husband Deeley and wife Kate discussing Anna as if she were not there, while in actuality she stands motionless looking out the window. Just prior to the acknowledgement of her presence, Deeley hints at the fact that the two women may be alter egos when he comments to Kate that when her friend appears, whom he supposedly has never met: "I'll be watching [...] to see if she's the same person" (17). Deeley seems to be the wedge between the pair, just as the mythical Hades separates mother and daughter.

Anna's absence from her "other half" ends as she abruptly turns from the window and interrupts the couple's "domestic silence." She immediately attempts to claim ownership of Kate by dominating the conversation with memories of "old times" which the friends have shared. Deeley retaliates by engaging Anna in a round of singing duels:

DEELEY (*Singing*) Blue moon I see you standing alone...

ANNA (*Singing*) The way you comb your hair...

DEELEY (*Singing*) Oh no they can't take that away from me...

ANNA (*Singing*) Oh but you're lovely, with your smile so warm...

DEELEY (*Singing*) I've got a woman crazy for me. She's funny that way.

Slight pause

ANNA (*Singing*) You are the promised kiss of springtime...

DEELEY (*Singing*) And someday I'll know at that moment divine, When all the things you are, are mine! (23)

This facetious word play evokes the battle between Hades and Demeter over who will possess Persephone. Anna's lines in the song relate to motherly aspects of Demeter, who wishes her daughter to stay as innocent and beautiful as the springtime before her abduction. Deeley's words involve lustful coveting and ownership akin to the conspiracy of Hades to snatch the maiden away from her mother.

Deeley and Anna's verbal attempts to upstage each other for the attentions of Kate reach a climax at the end of Act One. According to Penelope Prentice, Kate establishes control by leaving the room to take a bath. She states that "Without Kate as audience, Deeley and Anna establish an alliance which is at once closer and more hostile" (193). As Kate bathes, the rivalry grows more intense as the pair argue over the correct way to dry her off, resolving the dilemma with Deeley declaring: "I'll do it. I'll do the whole lot. The towel and the powder. After all, I am her husband. But you can supervise the whole thing. And give me some hot tips while your at it. That'll kill two birds with one stone" (52). In essence, Deeley senses that he can never reach the level of understanding which exists between these two women. Deeley, acting as both father and husband, wishes to treat Kate like a child. In an attempt to regain control over the situation, he wishes to coddle and powder her, like a newborn child, not a

newborn woman. In this sense, he fails to achieve a “true marriage” to Kate, but seems merely to keep her hostage from her friend/mother and ultimately from herself.

The chasm between the women as well as between Demeter/mother and Persephone/daughter can only be bridged through an acceptance of fate. Anna, as both a motherfigure and crone, realizes the futility of attempting to hold on to eternal springtime when she tells Kate: “I could do the hem on your black dress” (56). Here, she acquiesces to the emergence of a mature woman since the wearing of black symbolizes the disappearance of the maiden and the next cycle in the life of a woman. Anna ushers in the next phase of her own life and establishes yet another triangle: maiden, mother, and crone. In *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the crone is Hekate, the cavedweller who tells Demeter that her daughter was abducted (Foley). Despite the fact that she “only heard a voice” and did not actually see the act, Hekate collaborates with Hades in Persephone’s subsequent marriage to “death personified” since she did nothing to stop his actions (Woolger, 253).

The black which Anna wears symbolizes her mourning of the death of her “daughter” Kate, which parallels the *Homeric Hymn* in which Demeter appears amongst mortals “dark veiled” and wandering the earth, “pining in longing for her deepgirded daughter” (Foley, 7). The black motif also appears in the scene during which Deeley recalls that Anna’s “black stockings were very black because your thighs were so white” (47). These particular colors evoke images of the moon in the night sky as an ancient symbol of matriarchal consciousness and the maiden, mother, crone trilogy in its respective cycles of renewalwaxing, full, and waning (Stein, 39–41). The association of black with widowhood and old age suggests that mother becomes crone and enters menopause, the symbolic winter where she can no longer bear children. Here, Hekate acts as the catalyst in the transformation of maiden into mother and mother into crone.

As a representation of the waxing moon, the crone holds the dual role of beginnings and endings (Stein, 41). *Old Times* unfolds during the season of Hekate, the Fall Equinox, which occurs on September the twentysecond (100). The process begins with Persephone’s descent into the underworld, which symbolizes the womb as well as the psyche, signifies the first step into womanhood. The descent into the land of the dead brings the seeds of maturity, allowing a transformation of consciousness to occur. Hekate, whose name in Greek means “she who brings destruction,” ushers in rebirth (Woolger, 253). Just so, Anna brings destruction to Kate but also is instrumental in her birth into a fuller self.

Pinter uses images of death, dirt, and water to exemplify this Persephonelike rite of passage to womanhood that the play dramatizes and interprets. For example, Kate says of Anna:

I remember you lying dead. You didn’t know I was watching you [...]. Your face was dirty. You lay dead, your face scrawled with dirt, all kinds of earnest inscriptions, but unblotted, so that they had run [...]. Your sheets were immaculate [...]. I felt the time and season appropriate and that by dying alone and dirty you had acted with proper decorum. It was time for my bath. I had quite a lengthy bath [...], drew up a chair, sat naked beside you and watched you. (67–68)

Here, as Anna’s death dramatizes the transition from full-bloom to decay and hence her passage from her Demeter role to her Hekate role, *Old Times* echoes mythic times, focusing on cycle in which crops die and replenish the soil so that more can grow the next year. Just as Kate has bathed in the active “present” of the play, so she describes the bath she had taken in the “past,” both baths suggesting her sense of rebirth and renewal.

The maiden Persephone begins this cycle in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* when her father Zeus gives her over as “sacrificial lamb” to appease his dark brother Hades. Her descent symbolizes the first stage of the moon and coincides with the onset of menstruation or menarche (Larrington, 89). Persephone’s acceptance of the pomegranate seeds while in the Underworld binds her to the cycle where she must undergo a symbolic death, similar to that of the waning moon, a death that will last for the one third of the year that is winter. The “blood

red juice” of this fruit represents the menstrual blood and its new beginnings in a maiden’s life, bringing the process full circle. The seeds given to her symbolically impregnate her and prepare her to give birth to womanhood. Her abduction into the Underworld, the symbol of the womb and the psyche, marks the beginning of her “deflowerment” as she is taken to learn the mysteries of the self and sexuality.

Persephone’s abduction from innocence occurs due to the allure of one particular flower — the narcissus. In her attraction to this particular flower, Persephone as a curious innocent, shows a lack of depth which occurs in Narcissism. This trademark of youth involves a self-preoccupation and a lack of experience in the outer world (Lowen, 29–31). Here, Persephone, akin to the “fool” in the Tarot deck, is about to pass into the cycle of life through which each soul must pass. The journey into the Underworld occurs, it appears, as an inadvertent plot of Mother Earth (has she not provided the tempting flower?) against her own daughter, and in plotting against her, she plots against herself (Frazer, 459). The mythology of antiquity emphasizes the theme of a god or goddess “sacrificed to the self on the grounds that one is one’s own worst enemy” (Frazer, 455). Just as the pig symbolizes Demeter, the animal becomes her sacrificial beast, an offering to herself in the hope of renewal. So, too, the earth repossesses the grain in preparation for rebirth.

The cycle continues from maiden to fullness or motherhood.

The volcanic island in Sicily where Anna lives corresponds to the volcanic island in the Roman version of the “Rape of Proserpina” [Persephone] in which Pluto [Hades] leaves his lair of the dead to prevent an eruption from the volcano (150). Pluto, inspired by passionate fire, emerges from his own personal “underworld,” desiring unity with another and abducts Proserpina to instill within her the seeds of rebirth. Impregnated, daughter becomes mother and full moon. Anna as the twin of Kate, struggles with her for dominance, resisting inevitable change in which the two become separated briefly in transition. Attempting to mother Kate on many occasions, Anna gives her advice and wants to read to her. She tries to protect Kate from womanhood by warning her against going outside: “the park is dirty at night, all sorts of horrible people, men hiding behind trees and women with terrible voices, they scream at you as you go past, and people come out suddenly behind trees and bushes and there are shadows everywhere [...] and all the chandeliers [...]” (40). Here Anna recognizes the “true light” which comes from self-awareness and the death of the maiden. However, daughter must tear herself away from mother to experience this herself.

Kate shuns her “mother” in a rebellious insistence on running her own bath, but the separation of the two never reaches a complete schism, merely shifting like the seasons. Their dual identity is like that of “the divine mother and daughter [Demeter and Persephone] personifying the corn in its double aspect of the seed-corn of last year and the ripe ears of this,” a view of the Greek mother and maiden “borne out by their portraits in Greek art, which are often so alike as to be indistinguishable” (Frazer, 461). Deeley, who previously claims to know nothing of Anna and Kate’s friendship, recognizes this blurring of the two women when, in reference to coffee, he asks Anna: “You prefer it white with sugar, I believe?” (43). This allusion to innocence and the maiden Persephone/Kate, as well as the sudden recall of Anna’s past preferences, support the idea that Deeley really refers to his wife, whose personality fades into that of her friend in cycles.

In addition, the references to “good and strong and hot” coffee speak of the awakening effect which caffeine and experience can have on an individual. Pinter once again refers to coffee in the scene where Anna tells the story of the “crying man.” In the past, Anna had returned home to her London apartment to find Kate sitting on the bed “silent, drinking coffee” while the stranger sat in the armchair and sobbed. Anna states that the man approached her while she lay on her bed but she “would have nothing to do with him.” However, the stranger is accepted by Kate, for he returns and lies across her lap (28–29). This man (Deeley?)

represents Hades, who flees into the darkness with his bride-to-be. The coffee Kate drinks before she encounters this man establishes a link to sexuality and the death of the maiden.

This transformation of the self via experience and the awakening of sexuality perpetuates a transforming self-awareness. The manifestation of the desire to seek unity of the sexes through physical intercourse also ties into a more spiritual need to integrate male and female and reach a state of autonomy through mental androgyny. According to Marc Silverstein, Kate defies the attempts of both Anna and Deeley to contain and define her. He suggests Kate's "floating" quality after she emerges from her bath shows a "radically mercurial subjectivity conceptualized in terms of flux, multiplicity, and slippage, a subjectivity that floats across the discursive categories designed to entrap it" (111). Kate's ability to exercise power from within and elude the power-over tactics of maternal and paternal figures shows her "virginal" integrity remains intact despite its seeming contradictory existence with her sexuality.

Kate's emergence from her bath — she emerges purified or baptized, "clean as a pin" — evokes echoes of the emergence of Persephone from the Underworld and from the dark waters of the unconscious, suggesting a rebirth more pagan than Christian, less focused on the cleansing of sin and more on the birth into an earthly fertility. The question of masturbation arises when Deeley ponders Kate's activities in her shrine-like bathtub: "She gives herself a really good *scrub*, but can she with the same efficiency give herself an equally good *rub*?" (50). She is born of water much like the goddess Aphrodite who, associated with creativity, art, and beauty, emerges from the "sea-tossed genitals of Oronos" (Bolen, 228). In being sexual, one experiences autonomy and the power of self-expression, participating, according to Joseph Campbell, "in the creative action of the ground of all being" (154). Birth and creation, which arise from death and decay like the Phoenix out of its ashes, give mortals powers akin to a god or goddess.

The metamorphosis of the self occurs through the self. Anna steals Kate's underwear in a fusion of mother and daughter, with daughter gestating in the womb. Kate appears to be in the underworld in the scene where Anna refers to the way that Kate prefers to "be told in the dark. But of course it was never completely dark, what with the light from the gasfire or the light through the curtains [...]. She could hear my voice only. And so she listened and I watched her listening" (62). Just as Demeter wandered the earth calling for Persephone while she "hibernated" in the womb-like underworld, Anna seems to be talking to an unborn child.

Demeter's loss of Persephone due to her maturation process in the underworld proves to be superficial in the sense that the unity of mother and daughter transcends the boundaries of space and time. This bond, according to Carl Jung, is the intermingling of the finite and infinite: "every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother [...] every woman extends forward into her daughter," a participation and intermingling that makes time uncertain (quoted in Woolger, 162). In other words, the bond between mother and daughter is as eternal and mysterious as the moon in all of its phases.

Deeley, as Zeus Father on High, cannot understand these workings of the female body and mind. He rules the kingdom of light, which in Western Civilization is associated with reason and goodness. He finds comfort in the material world, such as Anna's yacht and views things in a cold, linear, objective way: "I use the word globe because the word world possesses emotional, political, sociological, and psychological pretensions and resonances which I prefer as a matter of choice to do without, or shall I say stay clear of" (36–37). Deeley cannot grasp the circular and earthy process of birth and the workings of the female, and Kate realizes her husband will never really comprehend:

I dug about in the windowbox, where you [Anna] had planted the pretty pansies, scooped, filled the bowl, and plastered his face with dirt. He was bemused, aghast, resisted with force. He would not let me dirty his face or smudge it, he wouldn't let

me. He suggested a wedding instead, and a change of environment. Neither mattered. (69)

As Katherine Burkman suggests, this scene demonstrates that Deeley cannot accept his wife on her level of earthy sexuality and the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth it offers (Burkman, 139).

Anna's second role as crone and wisewoman involves her desire for unity in the natural world and between the sexes. When she suggests that Kate wear a green top (earth/fertility) and the turquoise blouse (sky) (63), she evokes the triangle of sky (reason), earth (sexuality), and underworld (unconscious), and senses that they must be connected in order for true harmony to prevail. At the end of the play, the integrated Kate rejects Deeley as he at first lies across her lap and then gets up and slumps in the armchair (70–71). Kate appears to find him unnecessary since she has achieved spiritual and mental androgyny, resigning herself to the fact that "Moonlight-Giving Mother and Sun-Father are husband and wife but live in perpetual separation" (Larrington, 343). The marriage of heaven and earth seems to be severed in the sense that the mysteries of the female have been ignored by the hierarchy of Western civilization. The triangle, although presently stuck in an upward pointing direction, must return to the natural downward pointing position of the birth canal so that the power of life can emerge victorious.

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